

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7206
INFO USMISSION GENEVA
AMEMBASSY MANILA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 KUALA LUMPUR 8279

E.O.11652: GDS
TAGS: SREF
SUBJECT: FILIPINO REFUGEES IN SABAH

REF: A) GENEVA 11259, B) STATE 179822, C) KUALA LUMPUR 7075

1. SUMMARY. THE 90,000 PHILIPINO REFUGEES IN SABAH CONSTITUTE A SENSITIVE POLITICAL PROBLEM FOR MALAYSIA. WHILE THE FILIPINO MUSLIMS ARE MORE ASSIMILABLE INTO MALAYSIA THAN THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEES, ASSIMILATION IS OPPOSED BY THE SIGNIFICANT NON-MUSLIM POPULATION OF SABAH, SO LITTLE IS DONE BY EITHER THE FEDERAL OR STATE GOVERNMENTS TO DEAL WITH THE PROBLEMS. END SUMMARY.

2. AS FAR AS WE CAN JUDGE, REFTEL A GIVES A FAIR DESCRIPTION OF THE NUMBERS OF FILIPINO REFUGEES IN SABAH AND THE UNHCR PROGRAM FOR DEALING WITH THEM. IT IS, OF COURSE, DIFFICULT TO TELL WITH ANY ACCURACY JUST HOW MANY REFUGEES THERE ARE IN SABAH BECAUSE THEY ARE SO NUMEROUS, THEY ARE WIDELY SCATTERED THROUGHOUT THE COASTAL AREAS OF THE STATE, THEY OFTEN HAVE FAMILY TIES WITH NATIVE SABAHANS, AND THEY ARRIVE IN SABAH ILLEGALLY BY BOAT. IN
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DESCRIBING THE SIZE OF THE REFUGEE POPULATION, POLITICIANS HAVE IN THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS USED FIGURES VARYING FROM 60,000 TO 140,000. (THOSE WHO ARE OPPOSED TO HARBORING THE REFUGEES USUALLY CITE THE LARGER FIGURES. SABAH'S TOTAL POPULATION IS SOMEWHAT LESS THAN ONE MILLION.) REGARDING THE UNHCR STATEMENT THAT NOT ALL OF THE FILIPINO

REFUGEES NEED HELP, WE SHOULD NOTE THAT MANY ARE SO WELL-SETTLED IN SABAH THAT THE THRICE WEEKLY KOTA KINABALU-MANILA FLIGHT IS PACKED WITH "REFUGESS" RETURNING HOME TO THE PHILIPPINES ON VACATIONS.

3. MOST OF THE SABAH REFUGEES TEND TO BE POOR FISHERMEN AND COASTAL FARMERS, ALTHOUGH MANY OF THEM NOW LIVE IN SQUATTER SETTLEMENTS IN THE PRINCIPAL CITIES OF KOTA KINABALU, KUDAT, SANDAKAN, SEMPORNA, LAHAD DATU AND TAWAU. SOME OUTSIDE THE CITIES ARE ABLE TO SUSTAIN THEMSELVES THROUGH THEIR TRADITIONAL FARMING AND FISHING, AND MANY IN THE CITIES HAVE HELPED MEET SABAH'S CHRONIC LABOR SHORTAGE BY TAKING UNSKILLED AND SEMI-SKILLED JOBS IN CONSTRUCTION AND OTHER INDUSTRIES. MANY OF THE REFUGEES, HOWEVER, ARE UNEMPLOYED AND HAVE TO RELY ON THE UNHCR, SMUGGLING OR THIEVERY FOR THEIR SUPPORT. THERE IS GROWING RESENTMENT AGAINST THE FILIPINOS IN THE CITIES FOR THE SHARP INCREASE IN PETTY CRIME THEY HAVE BROUGHT. BECAUSE OF THIS AND THE HIGH VISIBILITY OF THE SQUATTER SHACKS IN THE CITIES, MOST OF THE LIMITED RESETTLEMENT EFFORT HAS BEEN FOCUSSED ON MOVING REFUGEES OUT OF THE CITIES TO REMOTE AREAS. THERE ARE PROBLEMS WITH RESETTLEMENT
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IN THE INTERIOR, HOWEVER, BECAUSE THE FILIPINOS ARE UNCOMFORTABLE AWAY FROM THE SEA AAND BROAD COASTAL RIVERS AND HAVE A DIFFICULT TIME ADJUSTING TO UPLAND AGRICULTURE.

4. WHILE WE AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT BY THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL SECRETARY (EF C) THAT THE FILIPINO REFUGEES ARE MORE "ASSIMILABLE" INTO MALAYSIA THAN THE VIETNAMESE, THE SABAH REFUGEES ARE A VERY SENSITIVE POLITICAL PROBLEM, WHICH THE GOM IS COPING WITH LARGELY BY IGNORING. MOST MUSLIM MALAYSIANS (LARGELY MALAYS) FEEL THE GOM HAS AN OBLIGATION TO ACT AS A CHAMPION OF THE MUSLIM MINORITIES IN BOTH TAHILAND AND THE PHILIPPINES, AND THE GOM DOMINATED BY THE UNITED MALAYS NATIONAL ORGANIZATION (UMNO) HAS TO BE SENSITIVE TO THIS SENTIMENT IN ITS RELATIONS WITH THE GOP AND IN ITS TREATMENT OF THE FILIPINO REFUGEES. THIS IS PERHAPS LESS SO NOW THAT THE CONSERVATIVE ISLAMIC PARTY (PAS) IS WEAKENED BY IN THE RECENT ELECTIONS, BUT IT REMAINS A FACTOR.

5. SABAH STATE POLITICS IS DOMINATED BY TWO MAJOR PARTIES, BOTH IN THE NATIONAL FRONT ON THE FEDERAL LEVEL, BUT BITTER OPPONENTS WITHIN THE STATE. BOTH PARTIES ARE NOMINALLY MULTI-RACIAL, BUT BERJAYA, WHICH CONTROLS THE STATE GOVERNMENT, DRAWS ITS SUPPORT FROM THE LARGELY NON-MUSLIM TRIBAL GROUPS OF THE INTERIOR, WHILE THE UNITED SABAH NATIONAL ORGANIZATION (USNO) IS BASED ON THE COASTAL MALAYS AND OTHER MUSLIM GROUPS. NON-MUSLIM NATIVES MAKE UP 41 PERCENT OF SABAH'S POPULATION, MUSLIMS CONSTITUTE 38 PERCENT AND THE REST ARE MOSTLY CHINESE WHO NOW GENERALLY SUPPORT BERJAYA. IT IS IN BERJAYA'S INTEREST THAT THE FILIPINOS NOT BE SETTLED PERMANENTLY IN SABAH

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SINCE THEY ARE VIRTUALLY ALL MUSLIMS AND THUS POTENTIAL SUPPORTERS OF USNO. ON THE OTHER HAND, USNO LEADERS GENERALLY FAVOR THE PERMANENT SETTLEMENT OF THE REFUGEES. (IT WAS UNDER TUN MUSTAPHA'S USNO GOVERNMENT THAT THE FILIPINOS WERE FIRST ENCOURAGED TO COME TO SABAH.) NEITHER SIDE PUSHES ITS VIEWS ON THE REFUGEES TOO STRONGLY NOW, HOWEVER. BERJAYA IS BY FAR THE STRONGER PARTY (IT HAS 41 SEATS IN THE STATE ASSEMBLY TO USNO'S

12), BUT SEVERAL OF ITS MAJOR LEADERS ARE MUSLIMS (INCLUDING CHIEF MINISTER HARRIS SALLEH) AND THE PARTY HAS HOPES OF BROADENING ITS APPEAL TO THE MUSLIMS AND ELIMINATING USNO. ALSO, BERJAYA LEADERS FEAR THAT TOO STRONG A STAND ON THIS ISSUE WOULD INCUR THE WRATH OF THE MALAY-BASED GOM IN KUALA LUMPUR, A SITUATION USNO WOULD NOT HESITATE TO EXPLOIT TO ITS OWN ADVANTAGE. USNO DOES NOT FAVOR ABSORPTION OF THE FILIPINOS TOO OPENLY FOR FEAR OF FURTHER ALIENATING THE NON-MUSLIMS (NATIVE AND CHINESE) AND THUS EMPHASIZING ITS MINORITY POSITION IN THE STATE. THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAS NO DISCERNABLE PUBLIC POLICY ON THE SABAH REFUGEES BECAUSE IT WISHES TO OFFEND NEITHER BERJAYA WHICH CONTROLS THE STATE GOVERNMENT NOR
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USNO WHICH HAS STRONG POTENTIAL ALLIES WITHIN UMNO.

6. THE UPSHOT OF ALL THIS IS THAT THERE IS VERY LITTLE PUBLIC DISCUSSION OF THE REFUGEE PROBLEM IN SABAH AND LITTLE MOVEMENT BY EITHER THE FEDERAL OR THE STATE GOVERNMENT TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT. THERE IS GREAT APPRECIATION ON ALL SIDES THAT THE UNHCR HAS UNDERTAKEN TO FEED, CLOTHE, HOUSE AND RESETTLE (IN A FEW CASE) THOSE REFUGEES WHO NEED HELP. THIS RELIEVES BOTH THE GOM AND THE SABAH GOVERNMENT OF THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACTIONS WHICH COULD BE OFFENSIVE TO OR UNPOPULAR WITH ONE FACCTION OR THE OTHER. GOM OFFICIALS RESPONSIBLE FOR REFUGEES WILL SOMETIMES TALK OF THE BURDEN OF 90,000 REFUGEES IN SABAH WHEN APPROACHED TO DO MORE FOR THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEES. IT IS TRUE THAT THESE FILIPINOS CONSTITUTE A "BURDEN" OF SORTS, BUT IT SHOULD BE REMEMBERED THAT THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT IS DOMINATED BY MALAY MUSLIMS, AND IN VIEW OF THE RACIAL/RELIGIOUS BASIS OF MALAYSIAN POLITICS, UNLIKE WITH THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEES, IT IS ESSENTIALLY IN THE LONG-TERM INTEREST OF THE MALAYS (AND THUS OF THE GOM) THAT THESE REFUGEES EVENTUALLY SETTLE IN THE COUNTRY. THE BURDEN LIES IN SORTING OUT (OR JUST LIVING WITH) THE CONFLICTING NEAR-TERM INTERESTS OF THE VARIOUS PARTIES INVOLVED.
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